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ABSTRACT

A study used children's definitions to explore the culture of the classroom from the perspective of the child. Definitions for school-related terms were elicited from first graders in two classrooms of a public elementary school in the Chicago metropolitan area. After having been acclimated to the presence of the researchers, the students were asked to supply and define a list of words for a dictionary intended to enable kindergartners to look up any word they needed to know for the first grade. Analysis of the definitions revealed that nondevelopmental factors such as experience of objects, language, and events exerted a strong influence on both grammatical form and semantic content. When the children had similar experiences with a term they produced homogeneous definitions. When they had different experiences, their definitions were divergent in both form and content. These results suggest that differences in definitions can help a teacher to assess student understanding, to find out where there are gaps and misunderstandings, and to determine whether the children are using experience of language, object, event, or task to learn. (JL)

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The Child as Lexicographer of Terms of the Classroom Culture

Judith Markowitz

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Running Head:

The Child as Lexicographer

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The culture of the classroom, like other cultures, is a complex system of rules, values, goals, procedures and terminology. And, as with other cultures, the degree to which an individual understands that complex system has a direct impact upon their ability to function smoothly in an educational setting. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for us to learn as much as possible about what children know about the culture of the classroom and how they acquire that information.

Since words are one of the principal means by which we organize the world, one way we can learn about a culture is to examine the meaning of important terminology. Anthropologists and ethnographers have traditionally done this by eliciting definitions from one or more members of the culture under study (Casagrande and Hale, 1967; Spradley, 1979; Werner, Schoepfle, Iris, Bouck, 1976). This approach has been used primarily with adult informants, but recently Litowitz (1977) and Wehren, Delisi and Arnold (1981) successfully elicited definitions from young children in their studies of language development.

The results of these studies indicate that definitions are not only a valid form of data about child language, but that they can give us insights into the relationship among linguistic form (syntax), semantic content (meaning), and experience. These findings suggest that elicitation of definitions for some of the important school related terms learned in kindergarten or first grade could shed light on children's understanding of the culture of the classroom and on the

ways in which they had learned those words and meanings. Furthermore, as a methodology the elicitation of definitions has the advantages of being quick, easily administered, repeatable and of providing the children with a clear understanding of the task at hand.

Method

The study was done in two classrooms of a public elementary school in the Chicago metropolitan area. In order to make the children more comfortable with the researchers, we spent two weeks in the classrooms as participant observers. Following this period of acclimation we assisted the classroom teachers in the presentation of a unit on dictionaries during which the children were told that they were going to make a dictionary of important school words. The purpose of the dictionary was to enable kindergarteners to look up any word they needed to know for first grade. The students were then asked to supply a list of words which would go into the dictionary. In concluding the lesson we informed them that we would be speaking with each of them individually about the meanings of some of the words.

The classroom unit on dictionaries served several functions: it enabled the children to assign a particular role to us. We were now the "dictionary people;" it maximized the uniformity of the knowledge the children had about the task; it prepared them for the interviews; and it reinforced the notion that this was indeed a class project. Therefore, before any interviewing was begun all the children were aware of the nature of the task, its goal and the content of the

interviews. To reinforce this knowledge, at the start of each interview we reminded the child that the goal of the interview was to help write a classroom dictionary which would contain the words one needed to know for first grade. We then interviewed the child on ten to twelve of the terms which had been suggested during the unit on dictionaries.

Each definition provided by a child consisted of their initial response to a term (the basic definition) along with answers to a series of probes based on the basic definition.

R - What is a vacation?

S - Well a school vacation is when you get a few days off from school, and it could be Spring vacation when (we get) some days off for Easter, like two weeks and then... (pause)

R - What about Saturday and Sunday. Is that a vacation?

S - It's a school vacation.

R - So, a weekend is a school vacation?

S - Uh huh, and when you're going on vacation, like Florida or something, that's another kind of vacation, but you don't get a day off for it from school.

The linguistic form or syntax of the basic definitions was analyzed using simple phrase structure analysis. The semantic content or meaning of the definitions was analyzed using semantic relations (Evens, Litowitz, Markowitz, Smith and Werner, 1980; Markowitz, 1977; Markowitz and Moses, 1982; Werner, 1979). The table (below) contains the semantic relations which were most frequently found in the data along with examples taken from the data.

Insert Table Here

In order to assess the impact of developmental factors on the defining strategies, we compared the results of our analyses with the developmental hierarchy of definition structure proposed by Litowitz (1977).

Results

Although we could detect some patterning which seemed to follow Litowitz' hierarchy, developmental factors appeared to exert only a minor influence on the defining strategies of the children in the study. Non-developmental patterns had a far greater impact. In a few instances we found children who had a strong preference for a single defining strategy. Studen A is an example of such a definer. Her basic definitions were variants of the following pattern: the word usually; a typicality statement (typical agent, object, goal or time); sometimes a Hierarchy relation; and a Sequence relation.

R - What is a spelling?

A - Usually only second graders have it but sometimes the first graders have it. We get a piece of paper, write our name and the date and then the teacher gives us words and we write them down or sentences and afterwards she talks with us about it...

R - What is a runner?

A - Well usually like in Spring Sing or at a play a runner is a person from a class and he comes up to your classroom and then the teacher when she sees him or he sees her, he or she will call the class to line up and then they'll go down to whatever they have to go down.

R - What's a reading group?

A - We usually have these fat books like the books we read and you have a reading group -- a group of people -- and they take turns reading and when they're finished with one book they go on to another.

In the basic definition for spelling we see three of the four parts of student A's defining strategy: usually; the typical agent statement "only second graders have it but sometimes the first graders have it;" and a Sequence relation "We get a piece of paper..." The definitions for runner and reading group contain all four parts, including the Hierarchy relation ("a runner is a person from a class" and a reading group --- a group of people".)

No child, even student A, used one defining strategy throughout the interview. We examined the terms themselves as a possible source of variation. We separated the terms with homogeneous definitions such as absent, auditorium, homophone, SRA and rug time from terms such as buser, monkey bars, teacher and first grader which had diverse definitions.

We discovered that some of the variation derived from the scope and kinds of experience the children associated with the terms. These experiences fell into three major categories: experience of the physical object, place, or event; experience of language; and experience of a task.

In some instances these experiences were common to a whole group of students producing homogeneous definitions. The students from one of the classrooms in our study had learned about homophones as part of a class lesson. The effect of the teacher's language is evident in their definitions of homophone:

1. It's two words that are the same but have different meanings. They aren't spelled the same but they sound the same.

2. It's a word that is spelled different and sounds the same but its not the same word.
3. It's like two of the same words that are spelled differently.
4. It's two words that are the same and they are not spelled the same and have different meanings. We made a homophone chart on the wall. Half the time they're multiple meaning words, which are two words that mean something different but they're spelled the same way.

Each of the four definitions begins by referring to homophones as members of the category words (Hierarchy) followed by one or more Attribute relation. There is a strong rote effect in these definitions. This type of rote effect appeared most frequently in definitions for terms which were learned in a formal presentation and for which the experience of language predominates. In most cases it is the language of the teacher which is being reflected in the definitions.

The definitions for absent offer an example of homogeneity resulting from similar experience of the event and language.

1. It means like someone's not there. Someone's not at school or something. If you weren't there for a whole day, it would mean you were absent.
2. That means one person is not present -- who isn't there. It has to be for just the morning or the afternoon.
3. Absent is somebody is not there. That's all I can explain.
4. That means when a person is out of school and it's not here for half of the day or for the whole day.

The rote effect of "not there" or "not here" which appears in all of the definitions and the Antonym relation for the word present once again reflects the teacher's language. This class had a daily attendance procedure during which the teacher asked "How many people are present?" "How many are absent?" and "Who is not here?" The similar experience of

the event is that the children observed that one must be gone for a specified period of time; the exact duration varies somewhat in the definitions.

The basic definitions for auditorium reflect a strong but similar set of experiences of the place or object.

1. The auditorium is a place where you see movies and people do plays there. You see plays there. There's all the seats and you see things. It's like a small small theater because there is a place where people do things up at the front and there's seats.
2. It's a place like a big room where you see films and that's where we have the sings.
3. That is where you see the Spring Sing and big plays that 4th and 5th grade classes have planned. You go to see movies there. There's probably a lot of seats.

The children all experienced the auditorium as a kind of place (Hierarchy relation) with certain definite functions (Function relation) and for some definers it was also experienced similarly with regard to Part-Whole (seats).

The basic definitions for S.R.A. provide an excellent example of homogeneity based on similar experience of a task. Virtually all of the definitions emphasize the Sequence relation.

1. They come in different colors. Next I'm on red and red is second. You have a folder with papers in it. It asks you questions. It tells you to write down things. And in the end you take a little paper and it tells you if you're all right. If you're all right on the first five you write "5." Then if you got the rest--the other 15 right--then you got them all right and you can write "15" in a little box. And then there would be two boxes--one with "5" if you got five and you'd color it up to "15" if you got fifteen. If you got anything less and you can color it less. Then you're done with that one page and you can do another page of S.R.A. There are twelve pages on each. But you don't write down all the same on each of them.

2. You have sheets of paper and they have "1,2,3,4" so you know what you're doing and stuff. Then you read a story and after you read the story you answer questions and then you have like five things and they have the same thing, like old, cold, hold and we have two more things like with the -old part and then they have a sentence like "There was an ____ man." So it could be old--old man. And then at the end you look on the back and it gives you two words to choose from and the second one gives you one letter missing. It's hard because it could be two things, but they have a picture.
3. There are these books and you open it up and there is a story. "Jim had a ball." And it might pop and it would ask you questions like "Did Jim's ball pop?" And if it was yes, you would cross out "yes" and it would ask you all those kinds of questions like, "Say his ball ____" if you said his ball did not pop and it didn't, then you would be right. There are twelve things in a thing and you might do one or two--how much you can do, but you usually do one. It goes up to twelve and I think the last one is olive and you go on to maybe A2 or else A3 or B1. There's a whole box of all the things and A1 is for first. That's the olive one. And then it goes to red, green and all that stuff. The first one is just like a sample. It's telling you what to do.
4. It's a kind of like this test but you have it every day. That's all.

There is no longer the roteness associated with terms governed by the common experience of language, but there is still a striking homogeneity deriving from the nature of the task itself.

The fourth basic definition offers an example of the importance of probing. If we had not probed we might have concluded that this child's perception of S.R.A. was fundamentally different from that of the other three children. By using a probe we elicited:

Well, you take this kind of like sheet. You have this folder for it, and you take this sheet and you open the folder up and there's this certain story on the sheet where you read the story. And, then there's these

questions telling you--asking you--what happened in the story. Then we have to write the answers down in the folder on these answer sheets. You take an answer sheet and you check it. If they are right you color this thing with a pencil which has the numbers in it. If you got fifteen right, you color up to "15."

By probing we were able to establish that this child's experience of the task was similar to that of the other definers. However, this particular child had a strong preference for a defining strategy which included the Hierarchy and Comparative relations. Therefore, his basic definition for S.R.A. is very similar to his other definitions. In contrast, the basic definitions of the other three children do not conform to the defining styles of those children which suggests that the homogeneity in these basic definitions derives from the term S.R.A.

Most of the words in our study had diverse definitions. Monkey bars, for example, has a highly individual and non-linguistic history for the children. Some children played on them while others did not. Some enjoyed them. Some children disliked them. The strongly personal nature of the experience with monkey bars lies at the base of the frequent use of the relation Self. The non-verbal character of the experience produced frequent gestural components within these basic definitions:

1. They're something that wrecked my hands. My hands and I can't go on the monkey bars anymore.
2. It's not like monkey bars, like the thing they swing on. We do it in P.E. Like we race to the monkey bars. There's this thing that you climb on--these like sticks you like um um umm ummm (gestures), but they're close together. That's why they call it the monkey bars.
3. Well, there's bars going like this (gesture), this (gesture) and this (gesture) and they're holded up and you go across them.

4. I knew what monkey bars are since I was just little, because even in nursery school I went on the monkey bars. Monkey bars are this ladder on one side and a ladder on another side, and there are these things that go across (gestures) and attach onto the ladder on each side. You can do chicken fights on them.

Among the words which had divergent definitions are the names of school subjects: math, word building, science and reading. These are terms which are very important in the culture of the classroom and are used with great frequency. They are very rarely formally defined for the children because they refer to highly complex, sophisticated concepts. The children rely on their experience of events, objects and tasks supplemented by language in their definitions for these terms. In some cases as with monkey bars, the definitions are highly personalized. This is evident in their great divergence in linguistic form and semantic content accompanied by the frequent use of the relation Self. The definitions for science are a good example:

1. You look at something and find out what it is, what color and shape and how it feels.
2. You learn about stuff, but I hate it. You study seeds and you get to study rocks and shells.
3. Science is what you study. You put seeds in mud. I don't like mud. It's mushy.
4. Science is something you are interested in, like space.

The definitions for reading also demonstrate a high degree of individuality.

1. When you take a book out of your desk and you read it and it has lots of stories.
2. It's a book and you read the words -- to find out about the story.
3. Learning how to do words -- how to write them down and remember what they mean and how to spell them. If you know how to spell them, you know how to see them on paper. Reading is something you can sound out usually.

4. It's like if somebody wrote these words you could look at it and know what it says and means.
5. Reading is something you do with spelling except that you don't write it, you read it.
6. When words are put together. It's like singing, but you're not singing it, you're saying it.

Definer 1 views reading primarily as a sequenced task similar to the task of S.R.A. described above. The second child defines reading as an object ("book") which has certain parts ("words") which are used in a particular, visual task ("read") for a specified goal or function ("to find out about the stories"). As with definer 1, this child focuses on both books and stories. However, child 2's definition emphasizes the experience of the object, only supplemented by the experience of the task. For the fourth definer reading is the experience of the event of someone "writing" certain objects ("words") followed by the event of looking at those objects. As with definer 2, this child perceives reading as visual, but here the visual act is strongly linked to the act of writing. Furthermore, child 4 limits the result of reading ("know what it says and means") to the level of the word rather than the text or story. Definers 5 and 6 also perceive reading as a kind of act or event ("something you do with spelling" and "when words are put together"). Like definer 4, the fifth child views reading as visual and associated with spelling while definer 6 perceives reading as an auditory event.

The most complex and interesting definition is provided by child 3 who describes reading as both a visual and an auditory experience. Once again we see strong conceptual links with writing and spelling, but

these connections are expressed as subclassifications of a complex, word-level task ("Learning how to do words").

These definitions for reading reveal very clearly the kinds of experience most strongly linked with the term, the modality or modalities of that experience (auditory, visual, both), the level at which the child perceives reading (word, text), and other terms and concepts which are strongly associated with reading (spelling, writing, singing, etc.). In addition to this diversity of information we find circularity -- reading is defined in terms of itself. The presence of circularity reveals the children's awareness of the complexity and abstractness of the term.

Conclusion

The definitions for science, reading and the other terms we have presented as well as the strategies and information which produced these definitions can give us important insights into the perspectives of these children regarding the culture of the classroom. But, definitions also can be used for more than description. They can serve as easily administered and useful tools of assessment for the classroom teacher. By examining differences in the definitions the teacher can gain insights into why certain children are doing well and why others are not. By comparing the definitions of the children with the teacher's definitions he/she can better appreciate what information is being absorbed, where there are gaps and misunderstandings, and whether the children are using experience of language, object, event or task to learn. All of these pieces of information can be of great help to teachers and

researchers in their quest to understand and facilitate the learning process.

Table of the Semantic Relations Frequently Found in the Data

Relation	Experience of Object or Event	Experience of Language	Sample Definition
Antonymy	To note differences from other objects or events	<u>not like</u> , <u>not</u> , <u>it's not</u> , <u>the opposite</u> , etc.	<u>absent</u> : one person is not present
Attribute	To note distinctive characteristics of the object or event	adjectives adverbs	<u>auditorium</u> : It's a place like a <u>big</u> room
Comparative	To note similarities to other objects and events	<u>like</u> , <u>sorta like</u> , <u>almost</u> , etc.	<u>systems 80</u> : It's like a computer...
Function	To see purpose or goal	<u>for</u> , <u>used for</u> , etc.	<u>word book</u> : It's for if you don't know how to spell it... you can ask your teacher to write it (the word) in there
Hierarchy	To see the class membership of an object, place or event	<u>is</u> , <u>is a</u> , <u>kind of</u> <u>a</u> , etc.	<u>auditorium</u> : The auditorium is a place... <u>dictionary</u> : It's a kind of book...
Part-Whole	To note segments of a larger pattern or entity	<u>has</u> , <u>part of</u> , <u>with</u> , <u>got</u> , etc.	<u>office</u> : The principal's office has a lot of Xerox machines
Self	To relate object to effect on self	<u>me</u> , <u>I</u>	<u>handwriting</u> : I hate handwriting <u>monkey bars</u> : They're something that wrecked my hands
Sequence	To relate event or task as as series of actions	<u>first...then...</u>	<u>spelling</u> : We get a piece of paper, write our names and the date and then the teacher gives us words...
Synonymy	To see equivalence with other objects or events	<u>is</u> , <u>same as</u> , etc.	<u>recess</u> : recess is free activity outside

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